

The Impact of English-Only Instruction Policies in Indonesian Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aimed to explore how English-only instruction policies are interpreted, implemented, and experienced in Indonesian higher education, with attention to pedagogical practices, sociolinguistic equity, and institutional internationalization.

Subjects and Methods: An interpretive phenomenological design was employed with 21 participants, comprising 15 undergraduate students and 6 lecturers from three Indonesian higher education institutions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, six classroom observations, and institutional document analysis between January and March 2025. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis supported by NVivo.

Results: Four interconnected themes emerged: pedagogical tensions, sociolinguistic inequities, institutional support and policy implementation, and global aspirations versus local realities. English-only instruction created difficulties in understanding complex concepts, reduced classroom interaction, and constrained lecturers' instructional flexibility. Students with lower linguistic confidence experienced hesitation and anxiety, while lecturers relied heavily on individual adaptation because institutional pedagogical guidance and training were limited. The findings indicate that internationalization objectives were not always aligned with multilingual classroom realities.

Conclusions: English-only instruction should not be evaluated through English use alone. Effective EMI requires institutional preparation, pedagogical flexibility, equitable participation, and multilingual support. The study contributes a policy–pedagogy–equity perspective for developing inclusive and sustainable internationalization strategies in Indonesian higher education.

INTRODUCTION

English Medium Instruction (EMI) has become a central strategy in the internationalization of higher education worldwide (Bowles & Murphy, 2020; Karabay & Durrani, 2024; Hultgren, 2024). Universities across Asia, Europe, and Latin America have increasingly adopted English as the primary language of instruction to strengthen their global competitiveness, attract international students, expand cross-border academic collaboration, and improve institutional rankings. This global trend reflects the growing perception of English not only as a lingua franca of science and scholarship but also as a strategic asset for enhancing institutional visibility in the global knowledge economy. Consequently, EMI has evolved beyond a pedagogical approach into a significant policy instrument shaping contemporary higher education governance and internationalization agendas.

In Indonesia, the adoption of English Medium Instruction has gained considerable momentum as universities seek to align with national policies promoting higher education internationalization and global academic engagement (Muslim et al., 2022; Monica et al., 2025; Muñoz et al., 2025; Alemu et al., 2022). Many public and private universities have introduced English-only instruction, particularly in international programs and selected faculties, with the expectation of improving graduates' global competencies, increasing international partnerships, and enhancing institutional reputation. While these initiatives reflect broader aspirations to participate in the global knowledge economy, their implementation occurs within a multilingual educational context where Bahasa Indonesia remains the primary language of instruction. This linguistic reality raises important questions regarding how English-only policies are interpreted and enacted across diverse institutional settings in Indonesian higher education.

According to Sahan et al. (2025), despite the growing adoption of English-only instruction, its implementation has generated substantial pedagogical, linguistic, and institutional challenges. Evidence from Indonesian higher education indicates that many students experience linguistic anxiety, reduced classroom participation, and difficulties comprehending discipline-specific content when English is used as the exclusive medium of instruction (Kurniawan & Ridhwan, 2025; Romadloni et al., 2025). At the same time, lecturers frequently encounter challenges in balancing language proficiency with effective content delivery, particularly in the absence of adequate pedagogical training and institutional support for English Medium Instruction. These conditions suggest that the effectiveness of English-only policies depends not only on institutional aspirations for internationalization but also on the extent to which they accommodate the multilingual realities and diverse educational backgrounds of both students and educators.

Existing research on English Medium Instruction (EMI) has made significant contributions to understanding its pedagogical and linguistic implications in multilingual higher education contexts (Gülle, 2024; Curle et al., 2024; Preece, 2022). Previous studies have primarily examined students' language proficiency, classroom interaction, learning outcomes, and lecturers' instructional practices, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges associated with English-medium education. Other scholars have emphasized the benefits of translanguaging and code-switching as strategies for improving comprehension and fostering more inclusive learning environments. Although these studies have enriched the literature on EMI implementation, they predominantly focus on classroom-level experiences and language learning processes. Comparatively less attention has been given to examining English-only instruction as an institutional policy that shapes governance practices, educational equity, and the broader internationalization agenda of higher education institutions. The relationship between language policy, institutional management, and stakeholders' lived experiences remains insufficiently explored, particularly within the Indonesian higher education context.

Despite the growing body of research on English Medium Instruction in Indonesia, several important gaps remain. Existing studies have largely examined EMI from pedagogical and linguistic perspectives, with emphasis on classroom practices, language acquisition, and students' perceptions. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how English-only instruction policies are interpreted, negotiated, and implemented as institutional strategies that influence governance, educational equity, and internationalization. Few studies have simultaneously explored the experiences of multiple stakeholders, including students and lecturers, to reveal how policy aspirations are translated into everyday educational practices across different institutional contexts. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and constraints associated with English-only instruction in Indonesian higher education.

This study seeks to extend the existing literature by examining English-only instruction beyond its pedagogical and linguistic dimensions, positioning it as an institutional policy embedded within broader processes of higher education governance and internationalization. Unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on classroom practices or language learning outcomes, this research integrates the perspectives of lecturers and students to provide a comprehensive understanding of how English-only policies are experienced, negotiated, and

enacted in Indonesian universities. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the study captures stakeholders' lived experiences and reveals the interplay between institutional aspirations, pedagogical realities, and sociolinguistic equity. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing discourse on English Medium Instruction by offering evidence-based insights that support the development of more context-sensitive, multilingual, and inclusive language policies in higher education.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how English-only instruction policies are interpreted, implemented, and experienced within Indonesian higher education institutions. Specifically, it investigates how these policies influence pedagogical practices, sociolinguistic equity, and institutional internationalization from the perspectives of lecturers and students. Through a phenomenological approach, the study seeks to generate a contextually grounded understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with English-only instruction. By doing so, it provides empirical evidence that can inform the design of more responsive, equitable, and context-sensitive language policies, while contributing to ongoing debates on English Medium Instruction, multilingual education, and higher education governance in multilingual societies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive phenomenological perspective to explore how English-only instruction policies were experienced and interpreted within Indonesian higher education institutions. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the objective of the study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, meanings, and lived experiences regarding the implementation of English Medium Instruction (EMI), rather than to quantify relationships among variables. The study was philosophically informed by interpretive phenomenology, which assumes that individuals construct meaning through their interactions with particular social, cultural, and institutional contexts, and that researchers actively interpret these meanings through a process of reflexive inquiry. This philosophical orientation was particularly suitable because the implementation of English-only policies is shaped not only by institutional regulations but also by the diverse linguistic backgrounds, educational experiences, and professional practices of those involved. Data were collected between January and March 2025 from participants affiliated with several Indonesian higher education institutions that had implemented English Medium Instruction within undergraduate international programs or selected academic courses. Employing an interpretive phenomenological approach enabled the study to generate a nuanced understanding of how institutional aspirations for internationalization were negotiated within everyday teaching and learning practices, while also revealing the pedagogical, sociolinguistic, and institutional complexities underlying English-only instruction.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted between January and March 2025 in three Indonesian higher education institutions that had implemented English Medium Instruction (EMI) within undergraduate international programs or selected academic courses as part of their internationalization initiatives. These institutions represented diverse organizational contexts, including differences in institutional status, academic disciplines, and the scope of EMI implementation. Such variation enabled the study to capture a broad range of experiences regarding the implementation of English-only instruction while maintaining a shared institutional commitment to internationalization. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that all respondents possessed direct experience with English-only instruction in higher education. The inclusion criteria for students required participants to be enrolled in undergraduate EMI courses for at least one academic year, thereby ensuring sufficient exposure to institutional language policies and classroom practices. Lecturer participants were required to have taught EMI courses for a minimum of two consecutive semesters and to be actively involved in implementing English-only instruction during the study period. Individuals without direct experience in EMI classrooms or those participating in short-term exchange programs were excluded from the study. The final sample consisted of 21 participants, comprising 15 undergraduate students from various

academic disciplines and 6 lecturers with experience in English-medium teaching. Participant recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, indicated by the absence of substantially new themes, perspectives, or meanings emerging from subsequent interviews. This sampling strategy ensured the collection of rich, information-intensive data that supported an in-depth exploration of stakeholders' lived experiences concerning English-only instruction in Indonesian higher education.

Data Collection

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method because they enabled participants to articulate their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of English-only instruction in their own words while allowing the researcher to explore emerging issues through follow-up questions. An interview protocol was developed based on the study objectives and relevant literature on English Medium Instruction (EMI), language policy, and higher education internationalization. The protocol covered participants' experiences with English-only instruction, perceived pedagogical challenges, institutional support, classroom interaction, and language-related coping strategies. Prior to formal data collection, the interview guide was reviewed by two experts in language education to ensure clarity and relevance. Individual interviews were conducted between January and March 2025, either face-to-face or through secure online platforms, depending on participants' availability. Each interview lasted approximately 45–90 minutes. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were digitally audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy and authenticity of participants' accounts.

Classroom Observation

To complement the interview findings, non-participant classroom observations were undertaken in six undergraduate EMI classes across the participating institutions. The observations focused on how English-only instruction was enacted during teaching and learning activities, particularly patterns of classroom interaction, students' participation, lecturers' instructional strategies, instances of code-switching, and responses to language-related challenges. An observation protocol was employed to ensure consistency across all classroom visits. Rather than evaluating teaching performance, the observations sought to document naturally occurring instructional practices and interactions associated with the implementation of institutional language policies. Detailed field notes were recorded immediately after each observation to capture contextual information, classroom dynamics, and the researcher's initial reflections, thereby enriching the interpretation of interview data through methodological triangulation.

Document Analysis

Document analysis was conducted to provide institutional context for understanding the implementation of English-only instruction. The documents examined included institutional language policy documents, curriculum and course descriptions for EMI programs, academic guidelines governing English-medium teaching, and strategic planning documents related to internationalization. These materials were selected because they represented the formal framework through which English-only instruction was introduced, justified, and implemented within participating institutions. The documents were systematically reviewed to identify policy objectives, implementation strategies, and institutional expectations regarding English language use in teaching and learning. Findings from the document analysis were subsequently compared with evidence obtained from interviews and classroom observations to strengthen the credibility of the study and facilitate a more comprehensive interpretation of participants' lived experiences.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke, which provides a systematic yet flexible approach for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, during the familiarization phase, all interview transcripts, classroom observation notes, and institutional documents were read repeatedly to develop a comprehensive

understanding of participants' experiences while recording initial analytical reflections. Second, initial coding was conducted inductively, whereby meaningful segments of data relevant to the implementation of English-only instruction were systematically identified and assigned descriptive codes. Third, the coded data were organized through the searching for themes process by grouping conceptually related codes into broader thematic categories. Fourth, during the reviewing themes stage, preliminary themes were continuously compared with the original data to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between themes. Fifth, themes were refined and clearly defined in the naming themes stage, resulting in four overarching themes that reflected the pedagogical, sociolinguistic, institutional, and internationalization dimensions of English-only instruction. Finally, the reporting phase involved integrating thematic interpretations with representative participant quotations, classroom observations, institutional documents, and relevant literature to produce a coherent and credible account of stakeholders' lived experiences. Throughout the analytical process, NVivo software was utilized to facilitate data organization, coding management, and retrieval of thematic evidence, while analytical memos were maintained to support ongoing interpretation and reflexive decision-making.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the rigor and credibility of the findings, several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study in accordance with the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba. Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation by integrating evidence obtained from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and institutional document analysis. Member checking was conducted by providing participants with summaries of their interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations, allowing them to verify the accuracy and completeness of the reported information. Peer debriefing was undertaken through regular discussions with colleagues experienced in qualitative and language education research to challenge emerging interpretations and minimize potential researcher bias. An audit trail documenting methodological decisions, coding procedures, and analytical development was maintained throughout the research process to enhance dependability and confirmability. In addition, reflexive memos were written continuously during data collection and analysis to encourage critical reflection on the researcher's assumptions and interpretations, thereby promoting analytical transparency and methodological rigor (Nowell et al., 2017).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout all stages of the research. Before participation, all respondents received detailed information regarding the objectives, procedures, and expected outcomes of the study and provided written informed consent. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. To protect participants' privacy, all identifying information was removed from interview transcripts, and pseudonyms were used during data analysis and reporting. Audio recordings, transcripts, and supporting research materials were securely stored and accessed only by the research team to ensure confidentiality and responsible management of research data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and institutional documents generated four overarching themes that describe how English-only instruction was experienced and implemented within the participating Indonesian higher education institutions. The themes were developed through the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis described in the methodology and reflected four interconnected dimensions of English-only instruction: pedagogical tensions, sociolinguistic inequities, institutional support and policy implementation, and the relationship between global internationalization aspirations and local educational realities. The findings were derived from the accounts of 21 participants, consisting of 15 undergraduate students and 6 lecturers, and were examined alongside evidence from six observed EMI classes and relevant institutional documents.

Table 1 summarizes the four themes and the principal findings emerging from the three sources of evidence.

Table 1. Overview of Emergent Themes

Theme	Principal Focus	Evidence Sources	Key Findings
Pedagogical Tensions	Teaching and learning experiences under English-only instruction	Interviews, classroom observations, institutional documents	English-only instruction created difficulties in conceptual understanding, classroom interaction, and instructional flexibility.
Sociolinguistic Inequities	Unequal experiences associated with students' linguistic backgrounds	Interviews, classroom observations	Students with stronger English proficiency participated more actively, whereas students with lower confidence experienced anxiety, hesitation, and reduced engagement.
Institutional Support and Policy Implementation	Institutional preparedness and support for EMI implementation	Interviews, institutional documents	Limited pedagogical training, instructional resources, and practical policy guidance constrained implementation.
Global Aspirations versus Local Realities	Relationship between internationalization goals and classroom realities	Interviews, classroom observations, institutional documents	Institutional ambitions for internationalization were not always aligned with the multilingual needs of students and lecturers.

Source: Authors' thematic analysis based on interview transcripts, classroom observations, and institutional document analysis (2025).

Pedagogical Tensions

The first and most consistently reported theme concerned the pedagogical tensions associated with implementing English-only instruction. Students and lecturers described a recurring mismatch between the requirement to use English exclusively and the practical demands of teaching and learning complex academic content. Three closely related patterns were evident within this theme: difficulties in understanding complex concepts, reduced classroom interaction, and constraints on lecturers' instructional flexibility.

Difficulties in Understanding Complex Concepts

Students reported that English-only instruction increased the cognitive demands associated with learning, particularly when lecturers introduced abstract theories, discipline-specific terminology, or technically complex material. Participants indicated that they sometimes understood the academic concept itself but experienced difficulty processing the explanation when it was delivered entirely in English.

One engineering student explained:

"Sometimes I actually understand the topic, but when everything is explained only in English, I need extra time to figure out what the lecturer really means. If the lecturer gives a quick explanation in Indonesian, everything suddenly makes sense. Without that, I often feel lost and just keep listening without really understanding the lesson." (Student Participant o8, Engineering)

The interview evidence indicated that students sometimes relied on independent translation, additional reading, or discussions with classmates after class to clarify material that had not been fully understood during the lesson. The difficulty was particularly apparent in courses involving abstract reasoning and specialized terminology.

Classroom observations provided supporting evidence. During conceptually demanding sessions, some students remained silent or requested clarification before proceeding with the learning activity. Lecturers responded by repeating explanations, simplifying vocabulary, or providing additional processing time. These observations were consistent with the interview accounts

indicating that linguistic processing could become an additional burden alongside the disciplinary content.

Institutional documents further indicated that English was established as the principal instructional language in EMI-related courses. However, the documents provided limited operational guidance concerning multilingual support when students experienced difficulty understanding complex academic content.

Reduced Classroom Interaction

A second component of pedagogical tension concerned the reduction in classroom interaction. Students reported that they were less willing to ask questions, express opinions, or participate spontaneously when English was the exclusive language of classroom communication. Their hesitation was frequently associated with concerns about making grammatical mistakes or demonstrating insufficient English proficiency.

Participants described situations in which they understood the academic issue being discussed but avoided contributing because they were uncertain about their ability to express the idea in English. Consequently, linguistic confidence appeared to influence classroom participation alongside disciplinary knowledge.

Classroom observations supported these accounts. In several observed EMI sessions, lecturers dominated classroom discourse, while students participated primarily through listening and note-taking. Student-initiated questions and extended discussions were less frequent, particularly during lessons involving abstract concepts or technical terminology. When lecturers invited responses, periods of silence were sometimes observed before students responded.

Students also described adapting to these conditions by postponing questions until after class or discussing difficult concepts with peers in Bahasa Indonesia. Such behaviour indicated that limited classroom participation did not necessarily reflect a lack of interest in the subject matter. Instead, students appeared to adjust their participation strategies to the linguistic conditions of the classroom.

Institutional documents encouraged active participation and student-centred learning but contained limited practical guidance for facilitating interaction among students with different levels of English proficiency. The data therefore showed a recurring difference between the expectation of active participation articulated in institutional documents and the interactional practices observed in EMI classrooms.

Lecturer Instructional Constraints

Lecturers experienced English-only instruction primarily as a constraint on instructional flexibility. Although participants generally regarded themselves as capable of teaching in English, they reported greater difficulty explaining complex ideas with the same precision, spontaneity, and contextual detail that they could achieve when teaching in Bahasa Indonesia.

One lecturer stated:

"I can teach the subject much more naturally in Indonesian because I know exactly how to explain difficult ideas. When I have to use English all the time, I simplify many explanations, and sometimes I feel that students only get part of what I actually want to teach. It feels like something important is missing." (Lecturer Participant 03, Humanities)

The interviews indicated that lecturers modified their instructional strategies in response to these constraints. They simplified explanations, repeated important concepts, reduced the complexity of classroom discussions, and sometimes reduced discussion time in order to maintain students' comprehension.

Classroom observations corroborated these accounts. During sessions involving complex theoretical or technical material, lecturers frequently slowed their delivery, reformulated explanations, repeated key concepts, and used simpler vocabulary. Interactive activities were less

prominent during these sessions, with lecturers placing greater emphasis on maintaining students' understanding of the material.

Institutional documents established English use as an important component of EMI implementation but offered limited pedagogical guidance concerning how lecturers should adapt content delivery to multilingual classrooms. The findings therefore indicate that lecturers were required to negotiate the relationship between policy compliance and classroom responsiveness through their own instructional decisions.

Sociolinguistic Inequities

The second theme concerned differences in students' experiences according to their linguistic confidence and English proficiency. Interview evidence indicated that English-only instruction did not affect all students in the same manner. Students who were more confident in English generally reported greater willingness to participate, whereas students who felt less proficient described greater anxiety, hesitation, and difficulty contributing to classroom discussions.

“I understand what the lecturer is explaining, but I do not always feel confident speaking in English. Some of my classmates can respond very quickly, while I need more time to organize my thoughts. I am sometimes afraid that my grammar will be incorrect or that other students will notice my mistakes. Because of this, I often choose to listen instead of speaking. I usually have ideas about the topic, but I prefer to discuss them with my friends after class.” (Student Participant 02, Education, Interview, 2025)

This excerpt demonstrates that sociolinguistic inequality does not necessarily stem from students' lack of understanding of academic content. Participant 02 explicitly distinguishes between understanding the lecture and confidence in speaking English. Thus, the ability to participate in class is influenced by linguistic confidence in addition to content mastery. The fear of making mistakes also leads students to remain silent, even when they have relevant ideas. These findings indicate that English-only instruction can create conditions where students with lower language proficiency or lower confidence have more limited opportunities for participation.

“I think English-only instruction affects students differently. Students who have used English frequently are more confident and they usually participate more actively in discussions. Other students understand the academic content but hesitate because they are worried about making mistakes. Sometimes I notice that the same students answer repeatedly, while quieter students rarely volunteer their opinions. I therefore try to give them additional time to respond so that language ability does not completely determine participation.” (Lecturer Participant 05, Education, Interview, 2025)

This excerpt reinforces the finding that linguistic confidence influences the distribution of classroom participation. Lecturer Participant 05 observed a distinction between students accustomed to using English and those who lacked confidence. Crucially, the lecturer did not equate student silence with a lack of understanding of the material; rather, some students were perceived as having a solid academic grasp of the subject but faced barriers in expressing it in English. Observations regarding the same students repeatedly answering while others rarely spoke also highlight an uneven pattern of participation. The lecturer's practice of allowing extra time demonstrates an adaptive strategy aimed at mitigating the impact of language proficiency on opportunities to participate.

Students with lower linguistic confidence frequently described concern about pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and the possibility of making mistakes in front of classmates. These concerns influenced their willingness to ask questions and express opinions. As a result, participation was not determined exclusively by students' understanding of academic content. Their ability and confidence to communicate that understanding in English also influenced their classroom involvement. Classroom observations were consistent with this pattern. Participation was more visible among students who appeared comfortable communicating in English, while students who were less confident tended to remain quiet and participate through listening and note-taking. The observations therefore revealed variation in classroom participation within the same English-only instructional environment.

“Sometimes I understand the lesson but cannot explain my ideas clearly in English. I become nervous when everyone is listening. I usually write my ideas first and speak later. When I use Indonesian with my classmates, I can explain the same ideas more confidently.” (Student Participant 13, Economics, Interview, 2025)

This excerpt demonstrates that the primary obstacle does not always lie in academic comprehension, but rather in the ability to express that understanding in English. Participant 13 understood the material but struggled to translate that understanding into oral responses in English. Writing down ideas beforehand and using Indonesian with peers served as adaptations to the linguistic pressure experienced in the classroom. These findings reveal that students develop alternative strategies to maintain understanding and communication; however, they also indicate that an “English-only” requirement can constrain spontaneity and comfort during academic interactions.

The findings also indicated that students developed different coping strategies. Some relied on peer discussion, independent translation, additional reading, or post-class clarification to compensate for difficulties experienced during English-only sessions. These strategies allowed students to continue engaging with academic material but also demonstrated that the linguistic demands of EMI were distributed unevenly among students. The data consequently show that English-only instruction created differentiated classroom experiences. While the policy was institutionally applied as a common requirement, students did not possess identical linguistic resources for responding to that requirement. The resulting differences were evident in confidence, participation, classroom interaction, and approaches to understanding course content.

Institutional Support and Policy Implementation

The third theme focused on the institutional conditions surrounding English-only instruction. Interviews and document analysis indicated that the participating institutions viewed EMI as an important component of internationalization. However, the practical support accompanying the policy was perceived as more limited than the policy expectations themselves.

Lecturers reported that they were expected to deliver courses in English while simultaneously addressing students' diverse linguistic needs. The interviews indicated that pedagogical adaptation was often developed at the individual lecturer level rather than through comprehensive institutional mechanisms. Lecturers therefore relied on their own experience and instructional judgment to determine how to simplify explanations, manage classroom interaction, and respond to students' comprehension difficulties.

“The institution clearly expects us to conduct the course in English, and we understand that this is part of the internationalization strategy. However, in the classroom, the situation is not always straightforward because students have different levels of English proficiency. I often have to decide by myself how much I should simplify an explanation or how I should respond when students do not understand the material. There are general expectations about using English, but the practical decisions are usually left to the lecturer. Most of the strategies I use have developed through my own teaching experience rather than through a specific institutional guideline. This means that lecturers may implement the same policy in different ways depending on their individual experience and judgment.” (Lecturer Participant 02, Business, Interview, 2025)

This quote demonstrates an implementation gap between institutional policy and learning practice. The institution established English-only instruction as part of its internationalization agenda, but decisions about how this policy was implemented in everyday classroom situations were largely left to lecturers. This suggests that institutional policy provides general direction but does not fully provide operational mechanisms to address variations in student language abilities. Reliance on individual experience also.

The institutional documents reviewed in the study similarly emphasized English use, internationalization, and global competitiveness. However, they provided relatively limited practical guidance concerning multilingual scaffolding, flexible classroom communication, or

specific pedagogical strategies for lecturers teaching students with different English proficiency levels.

“We receive the message that English should be used consistently because the program is designed to support internationalization. What is less clear is what lecturers should do when students cannot follow a complex explanation in English. There are expectations about the language of instruction, but there are fewer detailed instructions about how to support students with different levels of proficiency. In practice, I may repeat the explanation, use simpler vocabulary, or give students additional time to respond. These decisions are useful, but they are mostly based on what I think is appropriate for the class. I would be more confident if the institution provided clearer guidance on how to maintain English-medium instruction while still supporting students who need additional linguistic assistance.” (Lecturer Participant 04, Social Sciences, Interview, 2025)

This excerpt demonstrates that the language-use policy is clearer than the pedagogical guidelines for its implementation. Participants understand the objective of English-only instruction but face uncertainty when dealing with students of varying language proficiency. Strategies such as simplifying vocabulary, repeating explanations, and allowing extra time emerge as forms of individual adaptation. These findings support the document analysis results, indicating that the institutional policy focuses more on outlining language-use goals and expectations than on providing concrete pedagogical procedures.

The findings also indicated limitations in professional preparation for EMI. Although institutional materials recognized the importance of English-medium teaching, participants described limited opportunities for pedagogical training specifically focused on delivering disciplinary content in linguistically diverse classrooms. This distinction is important because the challenges identified by lecturers were not limited to English proficiency itself. They also involved the ability to maintain conceptual depth, classroom responsiveness, and student-centred interaction while working within an English-only policy.

“Using English for teaching is different from simply being able to communicate in English. I can use English in professional situations, but teaching a difficult academic subject requires much more than language proficiency. We need to know how to explain technical concepts clearly, how to maintain interaction, and how to respond when students have difficulty understanding the material. I have not received much training specifically focused on these issues. Most of the adjustments I make in my classes come from my own experience and from observing what works with my students. More systematic professional development would help lecturers manage the language requirement without reducing the quality and depth of the subject content.” (Lecturer Participant 06, Science, Interview, 2025)

This excerpt clarifies that EMI competence is not synonymous with general English proficiency. Participants distinguish between the ability to use English in a general context and the ability to teach complex academic content in English. Statements regarding the lack of specialized training further reinforce the finding that institutional support has not fully kept pace with the demands of EMI policies. Thus, implementation limitations stem not solely from individual lecturers' abilities but also from the institution's readiness to provide professional development relevant to EMI's pedagogical needs.

The evidence from interviews and institutional documents therefore indicates that implementation was characterized by a difference between formal policy expectations and practical pedagogical support. Institutions established English-only instruction as part of their internationalization agenda, while lecturers were frequently responsible for developing the classroom-level strategies needed to make the policy workable.

Global Aspirations versus Local Realities

The fourth theme concerned the relationship between institutional internationalization aspirations and the multilingual realities of classroom practice. Institutional documents

consistently presented EMI as a strategy for strengthening internationalization, global competitiveness, institutional reputation, and students' international competencies. Participants generally recognized these objectives and acknowledged the potential value of English-medium education for preparing students for international academic and professional environments.

"I understand why the university wants us to use English because it can prepare students for international opportunities and make us more familiar with academic communication in a global environment. I think this is important, especially if we want to continue our studies or work with people from other countries. However, not all students come to university with the same English background, so the policy does not affect everyone in the same way. Some students can immediately follow the discussion, while others need more time to understand what is being explained. For me, the international goal is valuable, but it needs to consider the actual language conditions of students in the classroom. Otherwise, English can become more of a barrier than a bridge to international learning." (Student Participant 15, International Relations, Interview, 2025)

This quote shows that students do not reject the goal of internationalization. Participants actually recognized the value of English-medium education to prepare students to face the global academic and professional environment. However, acceptance of these goals is accompanied by an awareness that students have different English language backgrounds. Thus, the problem that arises is not a conflict between students and the internationalization agenda, but a mismatch between global aspirations and local linguistic conditions. This directly supports the argument that EMI needs to be understood in the context of a multilingual classroom. At the classroom level, however, the implementation of English-only instruction was experienced through the immediate realities of students' linguistic backgrounds and lecturers' pedagogical responsibilities. Students' varying levels of English confidence affected their participation and comprehension, while lecturers had to balance institutional language requirements with the need to explain complex disciplinary material effectively.

"I support the university's intention to strengthen internationalization through English-medium instruction, and I believe students need opportunities to use English in academic settings. The difficulty is that the classroom is not linguistically uniform, and students respond to the policy in very different ways. If I strictly follow English-only communication at every moment, some students may lose the opportunity to understand the disciplinary content properly. Therefore, I sometimes slow down my explanation, repeat important concepts, or provide additional clarification when students appear uncertain. I do not see these adjustments as rejecting the internationalization policy, but as a way of making the policy workable within the actual classroom context." (Lecturer Participant 04, Social Sciences, Interview, 2025)

This excerpt illustrates the negotiation between policy compliance and pedagogical responsibility. While lecturers support internationalization and the use of English, they recognize that a rigid "English-only" approach can hinder understanding for some students. Adaptations—such as slowing down explanations, reiterating concepts, and providing additional clarification—demonstrate that classroom practice does not perfectly mirror formal policy formulations. Crucially, these adaptations do not represent a rejection of EMI; rather, they are mechanisms lecturers employ to translate policy objectives into the realities of the classroom. The classroom observations demonstrated this tension particularly clearly. Institutional expectations favoured English as the primary language of communication, while actual classroom practices involved adaptation by lecturers to maintain students' understanding.

These adaptations included simplifying explanations, repeating key concepts, adjusting the pace of instruction, and providing additional clarification when students appeared uncertain. Document analysis reinforced the distinction between institutional aspirations and classroom implementation. Internationalization documents emphasized the strategic value of English, whereas teaching guidelines contained less detailed discussion of the multilingual conditions in which EMI was implemented. The resulting gap did not indicate that participants rejected internationalization. Rather, it demonstrated that the institutional objective of global

engagement was experienced within a local educational environment characterized by linguistic diversity.

“The university talks a lot about becoming more international, and I think this is a good direction for students. At the same time, our classroom is still a local learning environment where students come from different educational and linguistic backgrounds. Sometimes the policy seems to assume that everyone can immediately adapt to English-only instruction, but our experiences are not the same. I can see the value of English for international communication, but I also think students need some flexibility while developing their confidence. Internationalization should give us wider opportunities without making students feel that their local language background is a disadvantage.” (Student Participant 09, Communication Studies, Interview, 2025)

Across the four themes, the findings show that English-only instruction was simultaneously an internationalization strategy, a pedagogical practice, and a sociolinguistic policy. Participants recognized the institutional value attached to English-medium education, but their experiences also revealed challenges concerning comprehension, participation, instructional flexibility, institutional preparedness, and unequal linguistic confidence. The convergence of interview, observation, and document evidence demonstrates that these challenges were interconnected rather than isolated features of EMI implementation.

The thematic analysis identified four interconnected dimensions of English-only instruction in Indonesian higher education. First, pedagogical tensions emerged through difficulties in understanding complex concepts, reduced classroom interaction, and constraints on lecturers' instructional flexibility. Second, sociolinguistic inequities were reflected in differences in students' linguistic confidence, participation, and coping strategies. Third, institutional support and policy implementation were characterized by strong internationalization expectations but comparatively limited practical guidance and pedagogical preparation. Fourth, the implementation of English-only instruction revealed a continuing tension between institutional global aspirations and the multilingual realities of everyday teaching and learning. The findings indicate that the experience of English-only instruction cannot be understood solely in terms of English proficiency or language use. The implementation was shaped by the interaction between pedagogical practices, students' linguistic resources, institutional support mechanisms, and broader internationalization objectives. These empirical findings provide the basis for the subsequent discussion of the implications of English-only instruction for higher education policy, pedagogical practice, and sociolinguistic equity.

Discussion

Pedagogical Tensions in English-Only Instruction

The findings demonstrate that the central pedagogical problem of English-only instruction is not simply whether lecturers and students possess sufficient English proficiency, but whether English can function as an effective medium for disciplinary knowledge construction without creating additional cognitive and communicative burdens. Participants described difficulties in understanding complex concepts, reduced classroom interaction, and constraints on lecturers' ability to explain disciplinary content with the same precision and spontaneity available in Bahasa Indonesia. This interpretation is consistent with the broader EMI literature, which increasingly conceptualizes instructional effectiveness as the interaction between language proficiency, content knowledge, pedagogical practices, and contextual support rather than as a direct consequence of using English as the medium of instruction (Lasagabaster, 2022; Macaro, 2022; Guo et al., 2024). Recent evidence also indicates that EMI can support both content and English development under appropriate conditions, but such benefits should not be interpreted as evidence that English-only delivery is inherently superior to multilingual approaches (Lee et al., 2025).

The finding that students sometimes understood disciplinary concepts but struggled to process them through English is particularly important. This distinction suggests that linguistic difficulty can obscure students' actual disciplinary competence. Lin & Lei (2021) demonstrated that English proficiency and academic ability interact in shaping students' content-learning outcomes in EMI

settings, supporting the interpretation that language proficiency should not be treated as an independent indicator of academic capability. Guo et al. (2024) similarly showed that EMI outcomes are influenced by multiple factors rather than by medium of instruction alone. The present study extends these findings by showing phenomenologically how the additional linguistic processing burden becomes visible in everyday classroom interaction. Students' silence, delayed responses, and reliance on post-class clarification should therefore be understood as possible consequences of processing demands rather than automatically interpreted as low motivation or weak academic engagement.

The reduction in classroom interaction also has theoretical significance. EMI is frequently associated with internationalization, active learning, and global academic participation, yet the present findings indicate that an English-only policy can paradoxically reduce the communicative conditions required for those objectives. Williams (2023) found that students' experiences of language choice and translanguaging can influence access to subject content, while research on multilingual EMI classrooms has shown that students and teachers often mobilize linguistic resources beyond English to construct knowledge. Atas (2023) similarly demonstrates that translanguaging can operate as a pedagogical resource in EMI content classrooms. These studies complement the present finding by indicating that meaningful participation depends not simply on establishing English as the official medium but on enabling students to mobilize the linguistic resources necessary for academic meaning-making.

The lecturers' difficulties further demonstrate that EMI is fundamentally a pedagogical issue rather than merely a language-policy issue. Lecturers in the present study reported simplifying explanations, slowing their delivery, repeating concepts, and reducing the complexity of classroom discussion. Shao & Rose (2024) identified similar challenges across higher education contexts in China, Japan, and the Netherlands, illustrating that EMI lecturers frequently need to negotiate between disciplinary expertise, language use, and classroom interaction. Dang et al. (2024) further conceptualize EMI teachers as agents who actively negotiate institutional demands and pedagogical realities rather than simply implementing policy directives. The contribution of the present study is to demonstrate that such negotiation is particularly important in Indonesian multilingual classrooms, where lecturers are required to translate an institutional English-only expectation into pedagogical practices that remain comprehensible to students.

The theoretical contribution of this finding lies in positioning EMI as a pedagogically mediated language policy. The effectiveness of English-only instruction cannot be adequately explained through a binary distinction between English and Bahasa Indonesia. Instead, classroom outcomes are produced through the interaction of language policy, teacher agency, student linguistic resources, disciplinary complexity, and pedagogical adaptation. This perspective adds a contextual dimension to existing EMI scholarship by showing that policy effectiveness depends on the pedagogical conditions through which language policy is enacted.

Practically, institutions should avoid evaluating EMI primarily through whether lecturers use English consistently. Evaluation should also consider whether students understand disciplinary concepts, participate in academic interaction, and receive sufficient opportunities to construct meaning. The EMI-QE framework proposed by Thumvichit & Laoriandee (2024) is relevant in this respect because it emphasizes program-level evaluation, including communication gaps, language support, and cultural sensitivity. The present findings suggest that similar evaluation mechanisms would be valuable in Indonesian higher education.

Sociolinguistic Inequities and Unequal Participation

The second major finding concerns the unequal distribution of participation and classroom confidence among students with different linguistic backgrounds. The study indicates that English-only instruction can create a distinction between academic understanding and linguistic participation. Students may understand disciplinary content but remain silent because they lack confidence in expressing their ideas in English. This finding is strongly consistent with Yuan et al. (2024), who found that insufficient preparation for EMI can widen differences among students with different English proficiency levels and potentially generate educational inequality. The present study adds qualitative depth to this argument by demonstrating how such inequality is

experienced through hesitation, fear of mistakes, delayed responses, and reliance on peer communication.

The findings also support the argument that English can operate as a form of linguistic capital whose value is distributed unevenly among students. Students who have had greater exposure to English before entering university possess an advantage in classroom interaction, while students with less exposure may have comparable disciplinary knowledge but fewer opportunities to demonstrate it. Fang & Hu (2022) showed that EMI can become entangled with language ideologies and identity negotiation, demonstrating that language choice is not a neutral pedagogical decision. The present study extends this perspective by linking language ideology directly to classroom participation. English-only instruction can unintentionally transform linguistic confidence into a condition for visible academic participation.

This interpretation is also supported by recent research on students' emotional experiences in EMI. Sun & Yang (2025) examined enjoyment and anxiety among EMI learners and demonstrated that affective dimensions are important components of students' experiences in English-medium education. The present findings similarly suggest that anxiety associated with linguistic performance can affect participation even when students understand the academic content. The implication is that classroom silence should not be interpreted automatically as disengagement. In multilingual EMI environments, silence may represent a rational response to perceived linguistic risk.

The finding contributes to existing research by reframing sociolinguistic inequality as an interactional process. Previous discussions of EMI inequality have often focused on access to EMI programs, students' proficiency, or academic outcomes. The present study demonstrates that inequality can also emerge inside the classroom through differences in who feels able to speak, who receives more interactional space, and whose academic knowledge becomes publicly visible. This constitutes an important theoretical contribution because it connects macro-level language policy with micro-level participation patterns.

The practical implication is that institutions should develop mechanisms that prevent English proficiency from becoming the sole determinant of classroom participation. Lecturers can provide preparation time before oral responses, structured peer discussion, written reflection before speaking, flexible question-and-answer formats, and controlled opportunities for multilingual clarification. Research on translanguaging in EMI supports this direction. Williams (2023) argues that developing students' translanguaging competence can help them navigate linguistic constraints, while Sameephet et al. (2025) show that students in Southeast Asian EMI environments use translanguaging as a resource for accomplishing content-learning activities. Boonsuk (2025) likewise identifies translanguaging as a pathway toward confidence and participation in multilingual EMI classrooms.

The novelty of the present study lies in showing that sociolinguistic inequity is not merely an outcome of different English proficiency levels. It is produced through the interaction between proficiency, confidence, classroom norms, institutional expectations, and opportunities to participate. This suggests that equity-oriented EMI policy should focus not only on raising students' English proficiency but also on redesigning classroom interaction so that students with different linguistic resources can demonstrate their disciplinary knowledge.

Institutional Support, Teacher Agency, and Policy Implementation

The third theme demonstrates that the success of English-only instruction depends heavily on the relationship between formal policy expectations and institutional support. The participating institutions positioned EMI as an instrument of internationalization, but lecturers reported that many practical decisions concerning classroom adaptation were left to individual judgment. This finding corresponds closely with the international literature showing that EMI implementation is frequently shaped by teacher agency and institutional conditions rather than by policy documents alone (Shao & Rose, 2024; Dang et al., 2024; Zheng & Choi, 2024).

Bolton et al. (2023), examining EMI in Indonesian higher education, provide an especially important comparison. Their findings reveal a diverse and nuanced picture of EMI

implementation across Indonesian institutions rather than a uniform national model. The present study reinforces this conclusion at the classroom level by demonstrating that lecturers interpret and adapt EMI requirements according to students' needs and their own pedagogical experience. Simbolon (2021) similarly identified international recognition and global competition as major motivations for EMI adoption in Indonesian universities. The present findings therefore suggest that the institutional rationale for EMI is relatively strong, while the operational infrastructure required to translate that rationale into effective teaching may remain less developed.

The distinction between English proficiency and EMI pedagogical competence is particularly important. Lecturers in this study did not describe their challenges simply as an inability to speak English. Instead, they emphasized difficulties in explaining complex concepts, sustaining interaction, responding spontaneously, and maintaining content depth. This distinction is supported by Wang et al. (2025) critical review of EMI teacher development, which identifies formal training, teacher collaboration, and self-initiated professional development as major routes through which EMI teachers develop competence. The finding also corresponds with Birgün (2024), who highlights the professional-development implications of lecturers' experiences with EMI.

Teacher agency therefore emerges as both a strength and a potential institutional vulnerability. Individual lecturers can compensate for policy gaps by simplifying explanations, adjusting classroom pace, or using additional linguistic resources. Dang et al. (2024) conceptualize this process as transformative teacher agency, emphasizing that teachers do not simply implement EMI policy but actively reshape it through classroom practice. The present study confirms this process but also identifies its limitation: when adaptation depends predominantly on individual lecturers, the quality of EMI becomes dependent on personal experience rather than institutional capacity.

The institutional dimension of the finding also corresponds with Yuan et al. (2024), who found that insufficient preparation and support can contribute to educational inequality and that students value teachers who combine English proficiency with pedagogical competence. This is particularly relevant to the Indonesian context because the internationalization value of EMI can be undermined when institutional support focuses primarily on the requirement to use English rather than on the professional conditions needed to teach effectively through English. The theoretical contribution is the identification of an institutional mediation mechanism between EMI policy and classroom experience. Policy does not move directly from institutional documents into classroom practice. It is mediated by teacher preparation, professional development, instructional resources, student support, and lecturer agency. This conceptualization helps explain why institutions with similar English-only policies may produce substantially different classroom experiences.

The practical contribution is equally direct. Universities implementing EMI should establish formal professional-development programs focused on disciplinary teaching through English rather than general English courses alone. Training should address explanation of complex concepts, interactional strategies, multilingual scaffolding, assessment, classroom discourse, and culturally responsive teaching. Institutions should also develop explicit guidance concerning when and how multilingual resources can be used without undermining the internationalization objectives of EMI. Such measures would shift responsibility from individual lecturer improvisation toward a more sustainable institutional implementation model.

Global Aspirations versus Local Multilingual Realities

The fourth theme provides the most important interpretive insight of the study: English-only instruction represents a meeting point between global aspirations and local educational realities. Institutional documents frame English as a mechanism for international competitiveness, global academic engagement, and institutional reputation. Participants generally recognize these objectives, but their classroom experiences demonstrate that internationalization takes place within a multilingual Indonesian educational environment. This finding confirms the observation that EMI has become closely connected with higher education internationalization while

simultaneously generating questions about local language practices and educational equity (Lasagabaster, 2022; Macaro, 2022).

The Indonesian context is especially significant because the diffusion of EMI has increasingly positioned English as an academic lingua franca within internationalization processes (Muttaqin et al., 2024). Bolton et al. (2023) similarly show that Indonesian EMI implementation is diverse and shaped by institutional and educational conditions. The present study contributes to this literature by demonstrating that internationalization cannot be treated as a purely global process. It is interpreted, negotiated, and modified by lecturers and students within local classrooms.

The findings also challenge the assumption that internationalization requires strict linguistic monolingualism. Recent scholarship increasingly distinguishes between the symbolic status of English and the actual multilingual practices through which knowledge is constructed. Rahman & Hu (2025), for example, found that teachers and students in an English-only institutional environment continued to use translanguaging and trans-semiotizing for pedagogical and epistemological purposes. Their findings suggest that EMI may function more as an ideological policy than as a literal prohibition of other linguistic resources. The present study reaches a comparable conclusion from the Indonesian context: classroom adaptation does not necessarily represent resistance to internationalization but may represent the practical means through which internationalization becomes educationally viable.

This perspective is further supported by research on translanguaging and multilingual pedagogy. Zheng & Lawrence (2024) found considerable variation in teachers' beliefs and practices regarding translanguaging in EMI classrooms, indicating that institutional language policies alone do not determine classroom language behaviour. Tai (2025) similarly demonstrates the relevance of translanguaging during transitions toward English-medium instruction, particularly for supporting motivation and language learning. These studies reinforce the argument that multilingual practices should not automatically be conceptualized as policy failure.

The present study therefore proposes a more context-sensitive interpretation of internationalization. The objective should not be to maximize the amount of English used in the classroom, but to maximize students' capacity to participate in international academic practices while maintaining meaningful access to disciplinary knowledge. This distinction is theoretically significant because it separates internationalization as an educational objective from English-only instruction as one possible policy mechanism. Treating the two as synonymous can cause institutions to evaluate internationalization through linguistic compliance rather than educational outcomes.

The practical implication is that Indonesian universities should consider flexible EMI models that retain English as a significant academic language while allowing pedagogically justified multilingual practices. Such an approach would not require abandoning English-medium education. Rather, it would recognize that strategic multilingualism can coexist with internationalization. Recent work in Southeast Asian EMI contexts provides empirical support for this direction, particularly in relation to students' use of translanguaging for content learning and participation (Sameephet et al., 2025).

The novelty of this study lies in integrating the four dimensions into a single interpretive framework. Pedagogical tensions, sociolinguistic inequities, institutional support, and global-local tensions should not be understood as independent problems. They form a policy–pedagogy–equity nexus in which institutional internationalization objectives influence language policy, language policy shapes classroom pedagogy, pedagogical practices influence participation, and participation determines whether internationalization becomes inclusive or exclusionary. This integrated interpretation moves beyond studies that examine EMI solely as a language-learning intervention or solely as an internationalization strategy.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings contribute theoretically by positioning English-only instruction as a multidimensional phenomenon located at the intersection of language policy, pedagogy, institutional governance, and sociolinguistic equity. Existing EMI scholarship has increasingly

recognized the complexity of these dimensions, but the present phenomenological evidence demonstrates how they converge in the lived experiences of students and lecturers. The study therefore extends the internationalization literature by arguing that the effectiveness of EMI should be evaluated through the quality of educational participation and knowledge construction rather than through English use alone.

A central theoretical implication is the need to move from a monolingual implementation model toward a context-sensitive multilingual implementation model. This does not imply replacing English with Bahasa Indonesia. Instead, English can remain the principal medium in international programs while multilingual resources are strategically recognized as pedagogical tools. This interpretation is compatible with recent work emphasizing translanguaging, teacher agency, and local EMI practices (Han, 2023; Williams, 2023; Rahman & Hu, 2025).

The study also contributes practically to higher education governance. University leaders should develop EMI policies that specify not only the desired language of instruction but also the institutional conditions necessary for effective implementation. These conditions include lecturer preparation, student language support, pedagogical resources, classroom interaction strategies, and mechanisms for evaluating learning outcomes. Evaluation should incorporate both language and content outcomes, as recent meta-analytic evidence indicates that EMI can produce positive English development while achieving content outcomes comparable to non-EMI instruction under appropriate conditions (Lee et al., 2025).

For lecturers, the findings indicate that EMI professional development should move beyond general English proficiency. Training should focus on disciplinary discourse, explanation strategies, interactional scaffolding, inclusive participation, assessment, and multilingual pedagogies. For students, institutions should provide preparatory support rather than assuming that admission to an EMI program automatically indicates readiness to learn complex disciplinary content through English. Yuan et al. (2024) provide strong evidence that insufficient preparation can widen proficiency gaps and threaten educational equality.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its contribution. First, the study involved 21 participants from three Indonesian higher education institutions, consisting of 15 students and 6 lecturers. The phenomenological design was appropriate for examining lived experiences in depth, but the relatively small and purposively selected sample limits statistical generalization across Indonesian higher education. Second, the study was conducted between January and March 2025, meaning that the findings represent participants' experiences within a particular period of EMI implementation. Third, classroom observations were conducted in six EMI classes, which provided important triangulation but cannot capture the full diversity of classroom practices across disciplines and institutions. Fourth, the study relied substantially on participants' interpretations of their experiences, which may have been influenced by their perceptions of institutional policy and their own linguistic identities.

Discussion Synthesis

The discussion demonstrates that English-only instruction in Indonesian higher education cannot be evaluated solely according to its capacity to increase English exposure. Its educational consequences depend on the interaction between pedagogical practices, linguistic confidence, institutional support, and internationalization objectives. The findings are consistent with recent international evidence showing that EMI can support content and language development, but that these benefits depend on preparation, teacher competence, language support, and contextual conditions (Guo et al., 2024; Yuan et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2025). The principal contribution of the study is therefore the development of a policy–pedagogy–equity nexus for understanding EMI implementation. At the policy level, institutions promote English as a mechanism of internationalization. At the pedagogical level, lecturers adapt the policy to the realities of disciplinary teaching and multilingual classrooms. At the equity level, students experience the policy differently according to their linguistic confidence and prior exposure to English. The relationship among these levels determines whether EMI functions as an inclusive mechanism for internationalization or as a policy that unintentionally reproduces linguistic inequalities. This

interpretation provides a more nuanced understanding of English-only instruction in Indonesian higher education. Internationalization remains a legitimate and important institutional objective, and English remains a valuable academic lingua franca. The evidence presented in this study, however, suggests that the achievement of internationalization does not require the elimination of multilingual pedagogical resources. A sustainable EMI model should instead combine international academic orientation with context-sensitive pedagogy, institutional preparation, and equitable participation. Such an approach preserves the global value of English while recognizing the linguistic realities through which higher education is actually experienced.

CONCLUSION

English-only instruction in Indonesian higher education is shaped by the interaction between pedagogical demands, sociolinguistic differences, institutional support, and internationalization goals. The findings show that English-only policies can increase difficulties in understanding complex disciplinary content, reduce classroom interaction, and constrain lecturers' instructional flexibility, particularly when students have different levels of linguistic confidence. At the institutional level, strong internationalization expectations are not always accompanied by sufficient pedagogical training, practical guidance, or resources for lecturers, resulting in considerable reliance on individual adaptation. The study also demonstrates that students generally recognize the value of English for international academic and professional opportunities, but this aspiration exists within multilingual classroom realities that cannot be overlooked. The main contribution of the study is the proposed policy–pedagogy–equity nexus, which explains how institutional language policies are translated through lecturer practices and subsequently shape students' opportunities for participation. The study therefore suggests that effective EMI should not be evaluated by English use alone but by its capacity to support disciplinary learning, equitable participation, and international academic preparation. A context-sensitive approach that combines English-medium education with appropriate multilingual pedagogical support may provide a more sustainable pathway for internationalization in Indonesian higher education. The study is limited by its purposive sample of 21 participants from three institutions and six observed classes, and future research should employ larger comparative, longitudinal, and mixed-method designs to examine the effectiveness of different EMI models across disciplines and institutional contexts.

SUGGESTION

Future studies should also examine the effectiveness of different EMI models rather than treating English-only instruction as a single uniform intervention. Comparative research could evaluate strict English-only, English-dominant multilingual, and translanguaging-informed approaches in terms of content learning, English development, student participation, and equity. This direction is particularly important because recent research increasingly suggests that multilingual practices can support content learning and participation without necessarily undermining the internationalization objectives of EMI (Rahman & Hu, 2025; Sameephet et al., 2025). Longitudinal research would also be valuable for determining whether the challenges identified in the present study diminish as students gain greater exposure to EMI or whether linguistic inequalities persist over time. Research should further examine whether institutional professional-development programs produce measurable changes in lecturer practices and student outcomes. Such evidence would allow universities to move from aspirational EMI policies toward evidence-based implementation models. Future research should address these limitations through comparative and longitudinal designs. Multi-institutional studies involving universities with different levels of internationalization could examine whether institutional capacity moderates the relationship between EMI policy and classroom outcomes. Quantitative studies could test whether linguistic confidence, institutional support, lecturer pedagogical competence, and classroom participation predict students' academic performance. Mixed-methods research could combine these measures with classroom observation and interviews to establish stronger connections between reported experiences and observable interactional practices.

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